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Women's Place in the Family and the Convent: A Reconsideration of Public and Private in Renaissance Florence

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The public-private dichotomy has traditionally been defined by contrasting spaces that are open to those that are enclosed. Historical studies of Renaissance Italian architecture and cities have generally accepted this categorization and have relegated women of the period to the private realm—the domestic or the conventual setting. An examination of contemporary writings and of the function of so-called private spaces of a Florentine convent demonstrates that our understanding of public and private must go beyond a consideration of formal criteria, and must also consider the identity and activities of the individuals who occupy the spaces in question.

FOR CENTURIES, THE RENAISSANCE WOMAN'S place in the built environment has been defined by an ideal whose roots can be traced to the fourteenth century, if not earlier. The image of the woman who rarely ventured into the city streets and *piazze*, particularly in Florence, has been perpetuated by a host of scholars, perhaps following the lead of Grangier de Liverdes who, in 1610, observed that "in Florence, women are more enclosed than in any other part of Italy; they see the world only from small openings in their windows."¹ Could it be that Florentine women actually lived as captives in domains defined by nearly impenetrable walls, and that only men appeared in the Piazza della Signoria or at the Mercato Vecchio? Certainly not. We must recognize that, until now, prescriptive literature focusing on the status of ruling-class women, taken at face value, has been the foundation for most of our assumptions about the subject of the public-private dichotomy.² When considering how Florentine women engaged buildings and the urban landscape, we must reexamine these texts to see what they reveal about how Renaissance Florentines defined public and private space. In so doing, it becomes clear that ruling-class Florentine fathers, brothers, and husbands preferred their women to remain

in the "private" realm. However, this does not necessarily mean that these women never stepped over the threshold of the family *palazzo* or the convent.

Florentines of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were prolific writers whose works took a variety of forms. These writings, a surprising number of which survive, permit a study of social ideals that would otherwise be inaccessible to modern scholars. Several texts express a common Florentine opinion of the period that the enclosure of ruling class women in domestic or religious environments—which are typically characterized as private—was essential to ensure the honor and virtue of the women and their families. This belief contrasts sharply with attitudes toward lower-class women, for whom family status and honor were less precarious, and for whom appearances in the public realm were a commonplace, if not a necessity, of everyday life.³ A survey of texts that treat the more restrictive standard that was applied to ruling-class women includes works by lay and religious men: Paolo da Certaldo, San Bernardino da Siena, Leon Battista Alberti, and Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli. Although none of the works took women's relationship to architecture or the city as their principal subject, the authors did place women within settings considered appropriate to their activities, thus providing an important source of contemporary viewpoints on the gendered nature of the built environment.⁴

The late fourteenth century writings of Paolo da Certaldo provide an example of ideas maintained by Florentines through subsequent centuries.⁵ The author recorded proverbs and advice that suggest that he considered his counsel to be old fashioned common sense, or ideals held generally by his peers. Among other things, the author instructed his readers on the subject of how to deal with women, whom he judged vain

and fickle, and the source of all great dishonor, shame, sin, and expense.⁶

When Paolo turned his attention to the subject of unmarried women, he explained that enclosure helped preserve their honor. He encouraged his readers to have their unmarried kinswomen follow the example of the Virgin Mary who was the "first and most excellent Virgin of virginity, and was queen and mirror of all other virgins."⁷ To follow the Virgin Mary's model, young women should stay "enclosed and locked up in a hidden and honest place" so that they will be "acceptable to God and to their husbands, and to other persons with whom they converse."⁸ The purpose of enclosure was to preserve the "reputation of chastity," the perception of a woman's virtue, which Paolo considered a "delicate thing."⁹ It was not enough for a woman to behave virtuously; she had to be believed to behave virtuously, and this required her and her family to control carefully when, where, and by whom she was seen. The author explicitly stated that unmarried women should be guarded from the eyes of young men. Thus, it was not so much the act of appearing outside the home that threatened to destroy a woman's reputation as the possibility that she would become subjected to the male gaze.

The comparison between women and the Virgin Mary—and the connection between the control of the woman's visibility and the preservation of virtue—were also made by the popular preacher San Bernardino da Siena. In a sermon he delivered in Siena's main square in 1427, the preacher spoke about the Virgin Mary's twelve handmaidens, among whom was the Virgin's doorkeeper, Madonna Clausura.¹⁰ San Bernardino recommended that his unmarried female listeners learn to stay at home and watch carefully who entered their homes, following the example of Madonna Clausura and the Virgin Mary. Madonna

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Clausura watched who came to the door without being seen herself. Men were forbidden to enter the Virgin's cell, and women gained admittance only under special circumstances. Bernardino implied that the limitation of contact with people from the "outside world" guaranteed the Virgin's virginity. Bernardino explained:

Let's talk of where the Angel found [the Virgin]. Where do you think she was? At the windows or engaging in some other sort of vanity? Oh, no! She was enclosed in a room, reading, to give an example to you, girls, so that you will never be tempted to stay either at the doorway or the window, but that you will remain inside the house, reciting Ave Marias and Our Fathers.¹¹

Implicit in the preacher's statement is the conviction not only that some women did linger at the windows and doors of their homes, but that, by doing so, they left their chastity open to question.

There can be no doubt that the principal purpose of controlling contact between an unmarried woman and those outside her family—and particularly men—was the defense of chastity. According to Bernardino, such contact would lead to the worst possible result: "As a result of familiarity you will later find [your daughter] big and pregnant!"¹² Instead, a daughter should be considered a treasure to be secured, like savings in a strong box, in the home.¹³

Similar views were expressed by characters in Leon Battista Alberti's *I libri della famiglia*, in which the author presented a dialogue between male members of the Alberti family.¹⁴ One of the subjects they discussed was the governance of the family. While considering ways to preserve the family, Alberti presented his speakers' judgments

on women's character or nature. Advice on the enclosure of women offered in the dialogue stems from these judgments.

In *Della famiglia*, the husband avoids association with the interior of the home and with domestic matters. Giannozzo, the oldest man, tells the younger Alberti men that he gives his wife the responsibility for household affairs because he considers it improper for men to be, "or to seem to be," interested in "household trifles."¹⁵ He believes it would be demeaning to "remain shut up in the house among women" when he has "manly things to do" outside the home "among men."¹⁶ Lionardo, one of the younger Alberti men, agrees, calling those men who concern themselves with household affairs "contemptible" and "little creatures" who linger among "little women" doing "little feminine" things, thus demonstrating their lack of masculinity.¹⁷ Giannozzo argues that a man's place is outside the home and expresses disapproval of a woman who concerned herself with matters "outside the house," and the interests of her husband and men "in general."¹⁸ He suggests that the woman who busies herself with matters outside the domestic realm encourages suspicion of her own character and invites dishonor.¹⁹ This prohibition of appearances in the piazza indicates a concern regarding the place where his wife appeared, and also regarding the people who would see her and whom she would see. Again, at issue is the possibility that the woman in question would be seen by individuals who could find fault with her appearance or actions, and consequently damage the family's reputation.

While arguing the inappropriateness of a woman's appearance outside the home, Giannozzo claims to discourage his wife from becoming interested in his "private affairs," suggesting that the realm of the street and the piazza was the site of men's private

and public affairs. The conflation of public and private in the case of a man demonstrates the objectification of Florentine women: a man's own business is considered private, even though it takes him outside the home, and it is not to be shared with his wife. In a woman's case, the "private" is not limited to matters concerning only herself, or spaces that she alone occupies. Her "private" business and her "private" spaces must be accessible to her paternal and marital families. For example, in Giannozzo's view, a woman's reputation does not belong to her alone: it also belongs to her husband and children. Therefore, if her character were to be called into question, the reputation of her entire family would be jeopardized. Giannozzo's instructions to his wife are reminiscent of San Bernardino's analogy between a daughter and money, both of which must be secured as the family's treasure. Giannozzo argued:

The woman's integrity has always been her family's adornment; the mother's integrity has always been a part of the dowry she passes on to her daughters. . . . Those who are pleased by all of our faults and all of [the harm that is done to us] cannot be displeased to see you [engaged in] dishonest [behavior] . . . because [by doing so] you offend God, me, our children, and yourself.²⁰

In *Della famiglia*, the control of women is also justified by Lionardo through an appeal to the ancients, who believed that women are, by nature, of a "less elevated mind" than men. Lionardo states that men are more suited to defend their country, religion, and children, and that their stronger character enables them to handle more stress than women, thus permitting men to travel "with honor" in foreign lands. On the

other hand, because women are considered timid, slow, and weak by nature, Lionardo submits that they are “more useful” sitting still: “The woman, as she remains locked up at home, should watch over things by staying at her post, by diligent care and watchfulness. The man should guard the woman, the house, and his family and country, but not by sitting still.”²¹

This locking up of the woman within the house equates her with objects in the home that can be observed by individuals outside the family. Giannozzo explains to his wife that it would be foolish to lock away all the objects in the house because, he suggests, his wife would lose the admiration of the neighbors’ wives if they found that she “had locked up the house to the very threshold.”²² Instead, he advises her to make sure that everything is in its place, and to arrange it in a way that will “do no harm to something else.”²³ When every object is assigned its proper place, its absence from that place is more conspicuous, and its recovery can be accomplished more easily.²⁴ Giannozzo’s wife is led to believe that she is the custodian of the house and all it contains, and that she has the authority to remove the objects from their places within the home, or even to rearrange them. Nevertheless, she is not permitted to leave her assigned place. She is to stay at home while Giannozzo goes outside to obtain the things she needs.²⁵ Giannozzo does more than suggest enclosing his wife in the home, however. He aims to fix her place within the household. She is not only enclosed in the home, but she is also enclosed within the home with access only to some parts of it. The study in which Giannozzo keeps his family’s books is not accessible to his wife. Even within this private realm, she is not permitted to move without restriction.

Mark Wigley has studied *Della famiglia* and Alberti’s treatise on architecture and identified the perceived threat to the

family that is posed by women’s appearance in the “public” realm.²⁶ He pointed out that space is gendered in the texts, but that space also engenders: whereas the enclosed woman is “feminine,” the woman in public is “more dangerously feminine” because she and her sexuality are mobile. In the Alberti dialogue, however, the dichotomy between public and private cannot be defined exclusively according to spatial criteria. *Private* cannot simply refer to those objects, people, and actions that occupy an interior space, and *public* cannot simply apply to those outside. To allow these two opposing spatial constructs to stand for *private* and *public*, respectively, is to miss the essential characteristic of each state in *Della famiglia*: the absence or presence of people who are not part of the family unit.²⁷ Giannozzo offers two illustrative examples. In one episode, his wife appears at a wedding celebration wearing makeup, and this embarrasses him in front of visitors.²⁸ In another example, Giannozzo considers a potential visit from neighbors’ wives an occasion when the Alberti family might be embarrassed by his own wife’s housekeeping habits.²⁹ Both cases might be considered public appearances because, although set in the domestic realm, they occur in the presence of people who were not, in the strict sense, members of the family. Although his wife is accompanied in both cases by at least one of the two things that fix her identity (the home or her husband), she still interacts with individuals who are not members of the family, and this exposure to the “public” makes her and the family vulnerable to humiliation.

Admittedly, the disgrace that might arise as a result of such public appearances was not likely to seriously threaten the family honor. In the first case, male family members were present within the domestic enclosure, and, in the second case, the “public” to whom Giannozzo’s wife was exposed was female; in both cases the woman at the

center of the so-called public appearance was married. Nonetheless, the *ricordi* of the early-fifteenth-century Florentine merchant Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli suggest that this sort of public appearance during a social occasion should be approached with caution. Morelli recommends that young women be prevented from attending “all parties and weddings and other vain things, which these days involve great dishonor.” as a means of preserving their honor.³⁰ Although such events were likely to be held among family acquaintances, Morelli did not consider them sufficiently secure. Thus, instances in which the domestic realm is not strictly private suggest that the traditional interpretation of the public-private dichotomy should be broadened to consider both who and where the “public”—characterized as outsiders—was in relation to Renaissance women.

The perception that a woman in public risked compromising her honor, expressed in texts as varied as those discussed above, was pervasive enough that it can be considered an important factor in determining how women interacted with their surroundings. The parental or marital home and the convent represented the three types of enclosure available to ruling class women, and, in those cases in which marriage was not an option, the convent represented the lesser of the evils. Women who did not leave home burdened the patrimony without contributing income or social connections to the family, and those who entered a convent produced the spiritual benefit of prayers offered on the family’s behalf and the social benefit of potential alliances with the families of other convent members, similar to those resulting from marriage.

During the Renaissance, the number of Florentine women who took the veil and the number of convents founded to accommodate them increased dramatically.³¹ As

the product of social and religious factors that had the greatest impact on the ruling class, the institution of the convent in Florence became defined, demographically and economically, by that segment of Florentine society that enjoyed relatively high status. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that these establishments, populated largely by women whose families had the most to lose if their chastity were questioned, were dominated architecturally and urbanistically by their enclosing walls. Curiously, this architectural manifestation of the ideology of enclosure signified a degree of monastic observance that was not always met in practice. When laypeople entered the areas of the convent complex designated for religious women alone, was it not obvious to all involved that the enclosure had been breached, and that the nuns were made vulnerable to speculation about their chastity? The permeability of the convent walls testified to the contradiction whereby the ideology of enclosure was simultaneously maintained by the ruling class and the Church, and circumvented by nuns, their families, and their patrons. To understand this paradox, we must consider the nature of violations of enclosure and then evaluate them within the framework of Florentine perceptions of “public” and “private.” An excellent example of the complicated nature of the contradiction is provided by the Benedictine convent of Santissima Annunziata della Murate.

From its foundation in 1390 through the decades following the Council of Trent (1545–1563), the convent, known popularly as *Le Murate* (“the immured women”), developed from a small group of pious laywomen living in a house on the Rubaconte bridge into a community of approximately 200 nuns living in a vast complex that was acquired gradually with the patronage of well-known families from Florence and elsewhere. Even as the community slowly

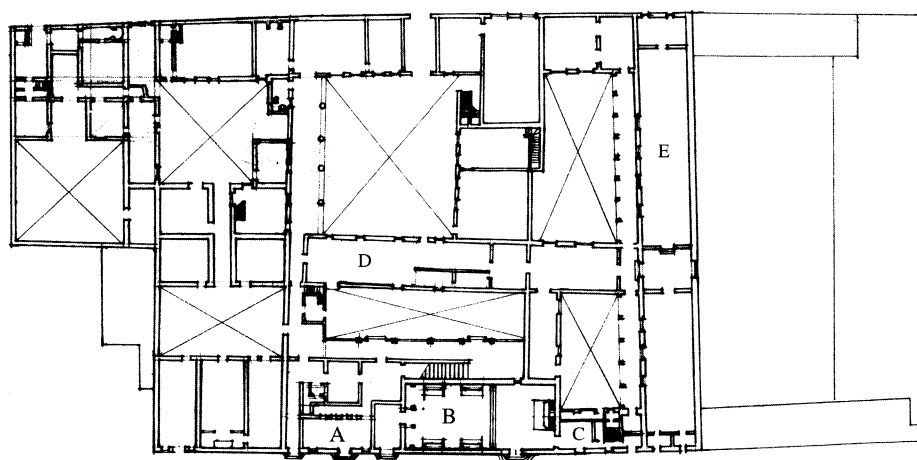
adopted the architectural and institutional attributes of convents recognized by the Church, it increasingly conflicted with the Church’s ideal of enclosure wherein no nun was to leave the convent unless her life was threatened, and no layperson was to venture farther into the complex than the parlor or the convent church.

Le Murate’s complex met the Church’s expectations in the formal, architectural sense. As the convent’s ground floor plan shows, the church and the parlor were conveniently located by the street so that laypeople would not have to enter spaces intended only for the nuns (Figure 1). To reach the church, visitors entered a foyer through a doorway located on *via Ghibellina*, and then turned to their right to pass into the nave. The nuns attended services in their choir, which was located on the complex’s second floor, and so did not have physical contact with laypeople (Figure 2). Nevertheless, grates located in the choir’s eastern wall allowed the nuns to see the church’s main space. Although this spatial relationship between the religious community and the lay community was typical in Florentine convent churches, it troubled Church authorities because the view into the nave allowed the nuns to observe the laypeople gathered below, distracting them from the religious service and tempting them to take an interest in the world outside. In 1601, Florentine Archbishop Alessandro de’ Medici advocated the placement of the choir behind the altar to avoid the distraction resulting from the nuns’ view to the ground floor.³²

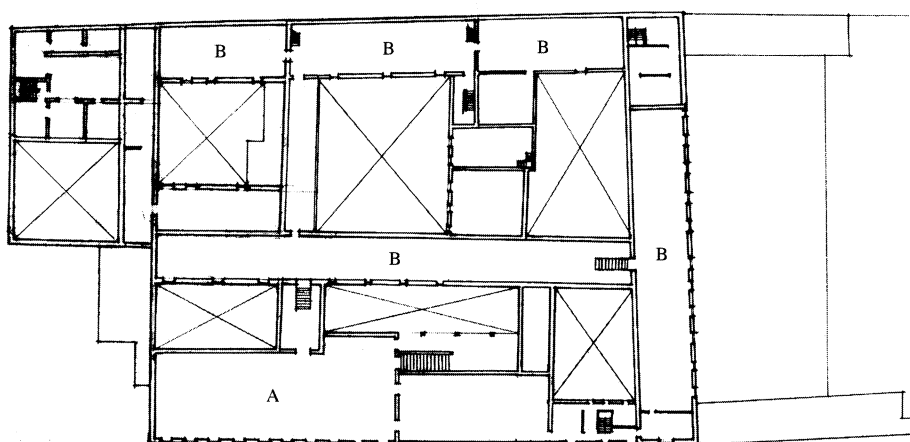
Although the nuns’ gaze was a matter for concern in the church, this was not the case in the parlor. There, religious women could see their visitors, and, perhaps more importantly, they could be seen by them, through a grate. The parlor was the only space within the convent complex where visual contact between nuns and lay visitors

was not forbidden; all other parts of the complex were intended to shelter the nuns from the view of those outside the convent community. Thus, visual privacy—the nuns’ seclusion from the view of laypeople—was important for the maintenance of the sanctity of the enclosure, but it was not absolutely necessary. Even as standards of visual privacy were relaxed in the parlor, however, regulations regarding the construction of parlor grates show that standards of physical privacy did apply there. Church authorities stipulated that the bars of parlor grates should be spaced to prevent the nuns and their visitors from touching.³³ At *Le Murate*, the parlor room intended for laypeople had two doors: one leading from the street into the room, and another leading from the room into the convent enclosure. This door served as the principal point of entry when the nuns of *Le Murate* welcomed laypeople into their enclosure, a practice that became increasingly common during the quattrocento.

It was not until the tenure of Abbess Scolastica Rondinelli (1439–1475) that *Le Murate* began to attract women from Italy’s most prominent families. The resultant rise in social status affected the convent in a number of ways. First, the change brought with it an increase in patronage from ruling-class families, marking the most active period of building in *Le Murate*’s history: by 1475, the convent defined the permanent borders of its site. This period also saw the establishment of a pattern for the convent’s violations of enclosure that demonstrates that familial links between the convent’s nuns, patrons, and lay visitors may have justified these breaches in the minds of all involved. Indeed, the convent’s chronicle, written by Sister Giustina Niccolini in 1597, offers the most complete record of the convent’s history and documents without any reservations about the many occa-



1. Ground floor plan of the Florentine convent of Le Murate. A: parlor; B: church; C: sacristy; D: refectory; E: *sala grande*. Via Ghibellina is located at the bottom of the plan. (Drawing by Robert Weddle after the 1832 site plan, housed at the Museo di Firenze com'era.)



2. Second floor plan of the Florentine convent of Le Murate. A: choir; B: dormitory. (Drawing by Robert Weddle after the 1832 site plan, housed at the Museo di Firenze com'era.)

housed within the enclosure, and thus making the convent an extension of the family palazzo of sorts. Once again, the Benci family had established the pattern. Giovanni Benci's daughter, Caterina, boarded at Le Murate during the years when her father most actively patronized the convent. In 1461, Amerigo Benci built a cell within the enclosure known as the *cella de' Benci*, which probably housed his daughter Ginevra. Many prominent women followed Caterina and Ginevra Benci into the enclosure, including Caterina Sforza, the well-known widow of Giovanni de' Medici, and Caterina de' Medici, who later married Henry II to become Queen of France. Even after the Council of Trent restated the Church's position on enclosure, the Medici family insisted that laywomen associated with the family be welcomed into Le Murate's enclosure as boarders, some of them coming to the convent against their will.³⁹

Le Murate's abbesses were charged with maintaining the convent's reputation, even if that meant closing the doors to visitors. According to the convent's chronicle, Abbess Caterina Ubaldini (1475–1498) made an effort to improve Le Murate's observance of enclosure regulations by restricting access "so that for some years no one entered unless in the case of extreme necessity"; only the convent's confessor, doctors, and surgeons were permitted inside.⁴⁰ Although the convent's patrons and the nuns' relatives had previously enjoyed access to Le Murate's enclosure, the abbess withdrew this privilege so that "neither the Benci, nor relatives, nor other benefactors entered, even for the consecration of nuns, as they had done many times."⁴¹

The special note that is made of this restriction demonstrates that complete observance of enclosure was exceptional. Although the chronicle claims that the community respected Abbess Caterina's

sions during which outsiders illicitly occupied spaces meant only for the nuns and designated Church authorities.³⁴

From the beginning of Scolastica Rondinelli's administration until the end of the sixteenth century, Le Murate was characterized by its associations with the Medici and their allies. The convent's first patron of great importance, Giovanni Benci, made such an impact on Le Murate's site that he is sometimes identified as its founder.³⁵ Benci maintained close ties to the Medici family through his work for their bank, and his employers' patronage of Florentine religious institutions may have inspired him to emulate them.³⁶ After Giovanni's death in 1455, his eldest son, Amerigo, became the principal administrator of Benci patronage

of Le Murate, most notably by constructing an infirmary with service rooms, a kitchen, and a pharmacy, as well as a dormitory and large work room. As Benci patronage waned, Le Murate began to attract patronage from the Medici family. After a fire at the convent in 1471, Lorenzo de' Medici made repairs to the convent as well as initiated new construction.³⁷ In the sixteenth century, Medici dukes and their allies, including the Cybo and the Vitelli families, remained the convent's most generous patrons.³⁸

Predictably, those laypeople who most frequently entered the convent's enclosure came from this circle of Le Murate's patrons. The Medici family and their allies used Le Murate as a shelter for kinswomen and others, demanding that these boarders be

rules until the second half of the sixteenth century, the story of the profession of Elena Orsini, a member of the noble Roman family, proves that the convent did bend its rules. Indeed, it provides an illustration of one of the most common breaches of the convent's enclosure: the ceremony when a new nun professed her vows. When Elena made her profession in 1499, many laypeople were present at the ceremony.⁴² The ritual took place within the enclosure, in the convent's *sala grande*, which was likely to have functioned as a chapter room, rather than in the church, as was customary. The chronicler reports that many *signori* and *signore* attended the service, "the enclosure being free [at that period of time] from the restrictions that [the nuns had at the end of the sixteenth century.]"⁴³ Consecration ceremonies and the celebrations that followed them were events of great importance for a nun's family. It marked the change of the professed woman's status: no longer was she eligible for marriage to a secular spouse; instead, she had vowed to be the bride of Christ. The woman could not provide influential social connections to a groom's family, but, in a convent as socially prominent as Le Murate, her association with the women of other ruling-class families could only have been considered advantageous. Thus, the veiling ceremonies and the celebrations that followed them appear to have been used as opportunities for a professed nun's family to publicize the advantageous "match" they secured for their kinswoman.

Epistolary evidence records other instances when laypeople with close ties to the convent entered the enclosure. Letters exchanged by Le Murate and its patrons prove that dignitaries who passed through Florence regularly visited the convent, suggesting that it was a kind of tourist attraction, a site of pilgrimage, or simply a curiosity. These letters are so matter-of-fact about lay

visits to the convent as to suggest that patrons came to think of them as their right, as a return on the investment of their benefactions. Among the most noted visitors to Le Murate were members of the Ferrarese court. A letter written to the Duke of Ferrara Ercole d'Este reports that the author, Antonio da Montecatini, had visited "the whole convent [of Le Murate]" with a group of ambassadors and dignitaries.⁴⁴ Ercole visited Le Murate himself in 1492 and saw "all the nuns, which was a beautiful thing."⁴⁵ Following his visit, the Duke maintained his relationship with the convent through the exchange of letters and gifts.

The convent chronicle not only records these breaches of enclosure but celebrates them, even as it praises the nuns' piety. To understand why the chronicler approached her subject in this way, we must recognize whom she was writing for. Perhaps most importantly, the chronicle was meant as a record of convent history for Le Murate's nuns. But Sister Giustina's documentation of the convent's social and patronage connections suggests that the history was also intended for another purpose. The account of these associations tied the families to Le Murate and made the convent's history their history as well. It provided a record for potential patrons who might continue the work of their ancestors or add their family's name to the list of esteemed benefactors, and thus later have their own names inscribed in the convent's history. It, like the festivities enjoyed by the nuns, their families, and their patrons, confirmed the association between the interested parties.

In light of how Florentines perceived public and private spaces and events during the period, I would argue that no one—with the exception of Church authorities who continued to search for ways to control convent enclosures—viewed these occasions as threats to the privacy and sanctity of the

convent. After all, those who crossed the threshold into Le Murate's enclosure were members of the convent's extended family—the nuns' relatives and the convent's benefactors. The privacy of that space was not unlike that of a palazzo where only family members were present. The apparent violation of enclosure by those whom it was intended to protect is not a paradox at all, unless viewed within the traditional dichotomy wherein the enclosure was private and all that remained outside was public.

Considerations of women's places in Renaissance Florence require a complex understanding of the relationship between public and private that is more commonly associated with the emergence of new institutions, new political and social modes, and new gender roles beginning in the nineteenth century. During the Modern period, the simplistic distinction between the public and the private was invalidated by establishments such as hospitals, prisons, schools, and even department stores, where personal and private acts were undertaken within the view of strangers and, thereby, made public.⁴⁶ The case study of Le Murate shows that, although the convent's monumental enclosing wall suggests adherence to the traditional, spatial definition of the public-private dichotomy, the history of the life that filled the complex proves that the categories are not so distinct. Thus, it comes as no surprise that so many Renaissance convents, including Le Murate, when suppressed during the nineteenth century, were adapted for use as hospitals, prisons, and schools by individuals who clearly recognized them as analogous in terms of their accommodation of public and private life.⁴⁷

Florentine perceptions of women's places within newly conceived or, in the case of the convent, redefined institutions were largely determined by class considerations. As Esther Da Costa Meyer points

out, class continues to determine the use of space by women and men. While women have left the home for the workplace in increasing numbers since the Industrial Revolution, she claims, “only affluent white housewives could afford to lead cloistered lives secluded in suburbia.” Although Da Costa Meyer portrays seclusion in the home as a privilege, I would argue that it must also be understood as a duty promoted by the class’s mores and values.⁴⁸ In Renaissance Florence, beliefs regarding women’s public and private lives were also conditioned by social status. Because social class was relatively fluid in Renaissance Florence, ruling-class families protected their status very carefully. For them, the maintenance of visual privacy was as important as the physical seclusion of women within a domestic or conventual interior, if not more so. This visual privacy protected a family’s women from the gaze of those with the power to destroy reputations. Such concerns regarding the perceptions and judgments of those outside the family did not haunt Florence’s lower classes in the same ways. It is likely that members of the Florentine lower classes maintained their own system of social and economic promotion and demotion, but it is unlikely that this system restricted the public appearances of lower-class women. Indeed, many women from lower-class families had no choice but to engage in household and commercial affairs outside the home. Thus, although the differences between public and private in ruling class Florence were characterized by the identity and activities of the individuals in question as much as, if not more than, spatial qualities, the nature of the dichotomy for the rest of the city’s inhabitants was even more complex. Although we know that Florence’s lower class women went in and out of the city’s enclosed and open spaces with more freedom than did their ruling class counter-

parts, the scarcity of documentation regarding these women’s lives discourages speculation on their interpersonal relationships or on their actions that might be characterized as either public or private. Distinctions between public and private become clearer when the social group in question is relatively homogeneous, as the Florentine ruling class was.

In Renaissance Florence, conceptions of the family formed the foundation for the ruling class’s understanding of the distinction between public and private. As contemporary texts and the case study of Le Murate demonstrate, discussions of the relationship between gender and architecture during the period must take into account women’s roles within the ruling-class family, and the family’s role within the society as a whole. Because the honor of a ruling-class woman was closely linked to the family’s honor, her appearance before individuals outside the family was of great concern to men. It was believed that, as long as Florentine women remained in the private realm, protected from the view of outsiders, the risk of damage to reputation and, thereby, the loss of status, were diminished. Within the family, however, women served as vehicles of social cohesion and political alliance.⁴⁹ It was in this spirit that the nuns of Le Murate admitted their families and patrons to the spaces that might otherwise be considered the private realm of the professed community.

Notes

1. E. Rodocanachi, *La Femme Italienne à l’époque de la Renaissance* (Paris: Hachette, 1920), p. 322.

2. I have adopted the designation “ruling class” to refer to individuals and families that belonged to the uppermost ranks of Florentine society, and who dominated Florentine economic, social, and political affairs during the Renaissance. As Anthony Molho has pointed out, the fact that Florence had no legal definition for its political elite makes it difficult to devise criteria that

accurately reflect the status of Florentines. Molho explains that even individuals and families that were proscribed could return to the city and reassert themselves in the Florentine political arena, and for this reason the group of prominent families was sometimes in flux. Furthermore, families that were barred from holding important political positions still sometimes maintained high social status. See Anthony Molho, *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 193–197.

3. Lauro Martines (“A Way of Looking at Women in Renaissance Florence,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1974): pp. 15–28) points out that it is important to consider social class when discussing the roles available to women during the Renaissance. On the issue of working women and public life, see Judith Brown, “A Woman’s Place Was in the Home: Women’s Work in Renaissance Tuscany,” in Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 206–244; and Natalie Tomas, “Did Women Have a Space?,” in John T. Paoletti and Roger J. Crum, eds., *Re-Visioning the Renaissance City: Art, Patronage, and the Dynamics of Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). I would like to thank Natalie Tomas for sharing the typescript of her article with me.

4. All of these texts are, in some ways, prescriptive, so the risks of using them as evidence of contemporary reality are obvious. I do not maintain that such recommendations were necessarily observed by Florentines at all times.

5. Paolo da Certaldo’s writings are published in Vittore Branca, ed., *Mercanti scrittori: Ricordi nella Firenze tra Medioevo e Rinascimento* (Milan: Rusconi, 1986).

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 29.

7. “La femina giovane e vergine deve vivere ad assempro de la Vergine Madonna Santa Maria, che fu la prima e somma vergine de la verginità, e fu reina e specchio di tutte l’altre vergini: e ’l simile dico di tutte l’altre donne.” *Ibid.*, p. 59.

8. “Ella non istava fuori di casa, e non andava discorrendo nè giù nè su nè qua nè là, nè udendo nè guardando gli uomini vani nè l’altre vanità, anzi stava rinchiusa e serrata in nascoso e onesto luogo . . . e così . . . sarebbero accettevoli a Dio e a’ loro mariti, e a l’altre persone con cui conversassono.” *Ibid.*

9. “Tenera cosa è nelle femine la fama della castità, è come fiore bellissimo.” *Ibid.*, p. 10.

10. *Clausura* translates in English to “enclosure” and signifies the doorkeeper’s responsibility for maintaining the enclosure that protected the Virgin. For the full text of the sermon see chapter 30 in Ber-

nardino da Siena, *Prediche volgari sul campo di Siena 1427*, vol. 2, Carlo Delcorno, ed. (Milan: Rusconi Libri, 1989), pp. 859–888.

11. “Ma diciamo da [sic] la trovò l’Angiolo. Dove credi ch’ella fusse? A le finestre o a fare qualche altro essercizio di vanità? Eh no! Ella stava inserrata in camara, e leggeva, per dare esemplo a te fanciulla, che mai tu non abbi diletto di stare nè a uscio nè a finestra, ma che tu stia dentro in casa, dicendo delle Ave Marie e de’ Pater Nostri.” Ibid., p. 862. At the same time that he recommended that women remain enclosed, Bernardino blamed his listeners for weakening the family unit by resisting marriage and, consequently, allowing the population to fall, thus threatening the Tuscan people with extinction. In view of the perceived crisis, Bernardino recommended marriage over entry in a convent, and, therefore, when he encouraged his listeners to remain enclosed, he cannot be assumed to have been advocating monastic life. When marriage was not a possibility, however, families certainly would have taken his message to heart and placed their unmarried women in convents to ensure their chastity. Bernardino was only one of many who favored married life over monastic life. See Molho, *Marriage Alliance*, p. 28.

12. “Che per la dimestighezza tu la troverai poi grande e grossa.” Bernardino da Siena, *Prediche volgari*, p. 864.

13. Ibid., p. 863.

14. Unless otherwise indicated in the notes, English translations are from Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, Renée Watkins trans. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1969). The English text will be referred to as *The Family* in the notes. All citations of the English text are followed by citations of the Italian text in brackets. These are taken from Leon Battista Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, vol. 3, Ruggiero Romano and Alberto Tenenti, eds. (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1969).

15. Alberti, *The Family*, p. 207 [pp. 264–265].

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., p. 208 [p. 265].

18. Ibid., p. 209 [p. 267].

19. Ibid., p. 210 [p. 268]. See also *ibid.*, p. 207 [p. 264].

20. This English translation is my own. For the English translation offered by Watkins, see *ibid.*, p. 213 [pp. 272–273]: “La onestà della donna sempre fu ornamento della famiglia; l’onestà della madre sempre fu parte di dote alle figliuole; l’onestà in ciascuna più valse che ogni bellezza. Lodasi il bello viso, ma e’ disonesti occhi lo fanno lordo di biasimo e spesso troppo acceso di vergogna o pallido di dolore e tristezza d’animo. Piace una signorile persona, ma uno disonesto cenno, uno atto di incontinenza subito la

rende vilissima . . . e a chi solo piace ogni nostro male e ogni nostro danno, a costui solo può non dispiacere vederti disonesto . . . chè a quello modo faresti ingiuria a Dio, a me, a’ figliuoli nostri e a te stessa.”

21. Ibid., pp. 207–208 [p. 265]: “Contrario le femmine quasi tutte si veggono timide da natura, molle, tarde, e per questo più utili sedendo a custodire le cose, quasi come la natura così provvedesse al vivere nostro, volendo che l’uomo rechi a casa, la donna lo serbi. Difenda la donna serrata in casa le cose e sè stessa con ozio, timore e suspizione. L’uomo difenda la donna, la casa, e suoi e la patria sua, non sedendo ma esercitando l’animo.” It is interesting to note that the phrase “ozio, timore, e suspizione” is rendered somewhat benign in Watkins’s English translation, becoming “diligent care and watchfulness” without communicating the fear and suspicion indicated in the Italian.

22. Ibid., p. 222 [p. 285].

23. Ibid., p. 222 [p. 285].

24. Alberti also addresses this issue in his treatise on architecture: in Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor, eds., *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 152.

25. Alberti, *The Family*, vol. 3, p. 211 [p. 270].

26. Mark Wigley, “Untitled: The Housing of Gender,” in Beatriz Colomina, ed., *Sexuality & Space* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), pp. 327–389.

27. Giannozzo defines the family as his children and wife, and other members of the household. Alberti, *The Family*, vol. 2, p. 180 [p. 226].

28. Alberti, *The Family*, vol. 3, p. 215 [p. 276].

29. Ibid., p. 222 [p. 285].

30. Branca, *Mercanti scrittori*, p. 169.

31. The period of greatest activity was in the 1400s, when the number of women affiliated with religious communities exploded from approximately 440 in 1428 to an estimated 2,000 by the century’s close. For estimates of the number of Florentine religious communities, see Gene Brucker, “Monasteries, Friaries, and Nunneries in Quattrocento Florence,” in Timothy Verdon and John Henderson, eds., *Christianity and the Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1990), pp. 41–62; and Richard Trexler, “The Nuns of Florence,” in *Power and Dependence in Renaissance Florence*, vol. 2 of *The Women of Renaissance Florence* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1993), p. 12. Another estimate appears in Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (BNCF), *Fondo principale II I*, 120, ff. 102v–206, which lists forty-seven Florentine convents in 1552. Even as we attempt to state the number of Florentine religious communities, we must

recognize that the accuracy of any estimate is questionable. Houses were founded and suppressed on a regular basis, and populations of religious communities were combined with or scattered among other communities as authorities deemed it necessary, making it very difficult to track numbers of houses and religious communities through the period.

32. After stating his preference for the location of the choir behind the altar, the archbishop writes, “And if, in my time, some new ones were to be made, or already constructed ones to be restored, it would be good to arrange them in this way so that the nuns cannot see the lay people, and they have no occasion to divert their minds from Divine Praises.” Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Codice Panciatichi 119, tomo II (Trattato sopra il governo de’ monasteri), ff. 85–86.

33. Ibid., f. 86.

34. When Le Murate was suppressed by Napoleon in 1808, many of its records were lost or destroyed. The chronicle remains the most important known source regarding the convent’s architecture and history. BNCF, II II, 509.

35. Raoul Morçay, *Saint Antonin, archevêque de Florence, 1389–1459* (Paris: Librairie Gabalda, 1914), p. 53. According to the convent’s chronicle, Benci made a substantial financial investment at Le Murate (an estimated 25,000 scudi). BNCF, II II, 509, ff. 27v–28r.

36. He began work at the Rome branch of the Medici bank in 1409, went to Geneva in 1424 to set up a branch of the business, and became its director in 1426. When Cosimo de’ Medici returned to Florence from exile in 1434, he assigned Benci a position as general manager of the Medici bank. When Cosimo died, Benci was named director of the Medici company. See Y. Renouard, *Dizionario biografico italiano*, “Benci, Giovanni,” pp. 194–196.

37. BNCF, II II, 509, f. 42v.

38. By the time the Cybo and the Vitelli families became active patrons at Le Murate, the Medici had become hereditary rulers of Florence. Although they were not Florentines, they were Tuscan, and played important roles in the Medici family’s extended political network.

39. Ginevra Perini was sent to Le Murate by Grand Duke Francesco I in May 1574, and Camilla Martelli, widow of Grand Duke Cosimo I, was forced by Francesco I to enter the convent the night her husband died in April 1574. Both women left the convent following brief and unhappy stays. See Sandra L. Weddle, “Enclosing Le Murate: The Ideology of Enclosure and the Architecture of a Florentine Convent, 1390–1597” (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1997), pp. 300–302.

40. "Inspirata da Dio li parve di restringer talmente la clausura che per qualche anno non ci entrassi persona alcuna se non per estrema necessità. BNCF, II II, 509, f. 52r.

41. "...che mai ci entrò persona, nè Benci, nè parenti, nè altri benefattori, etiam nelle consacre delle monache, che le fecion più volte." Ibid.

42. Ibid., f. 65r.

43. Ibid. Regarding similar festivities for the consecration of abbess Tita dell'Antella in 1558, see ibid, f. 52r.

44. "... andò a vedere le Murate et intrò dentro con alcuni deli suoi e nei oratori, et cerchè tuto el convento che è una gran cosa." Archivio di Stato di Modena, Archivio Segreto Estense, *Catoggio degli Ambasciatori di Firenze*, f. 2/a.

45. Ibid. Regarding Ercole's visit, see Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), *Corporazioni Religiose*

Soppresse dal Governo Francese 81, n. 100, f. 190–194. Ercole's description of his visit is cited in F.W. Kent, "Lorenzo de' Medici, Madonna Scolastica Rondinelli and the Politics of Architectural Patronage at the Convent of Le Murate (1471–1472)," in A. Esch and C.L. Frommel, eds., *Arte, Committenza ed Economia a Roma e nelle Corte del Rinascimento, 1420–1530* (Turin: 1995), pp. 358, 375, n. 28. For Ercole's correspondence with Le Murate, see ASF, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresse dal Governo Francese* 81, n. 100, ff. 288–297.

46. Lynne Breslin, "Confessions in Public Space," in Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, eds., *The Sex of Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), p. 263.

47. After Le Murate was suppressed, the site was adapted for use as a prison, a function it served until 1983, when the prison was closed. Today, the complex is divided among a number of functions, in-

cluding a police administrative office, residences, and an open-air cinema and bar.

48. Esther Da Costa Meyer, "La Donne è Mobile: Agoraphobia, Women and Urban Space," in Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, eds., *The Sex of Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), p. 149

49. Evidence of ways that women helped form such alliances is abundant. See, for example, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Florence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), and Lorenzo Fabbri, *Alleanza matrimoniale e patrizato nella Firenze del '400: Studio sulla famiglia Strozzi* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1991), and Molho, *Marriage Alliance*.